Ironic Expressions: Echo or Relevant Inappropriateness ?

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Abstract

This research adresses the pragmatic phenomenon of irony in the light of two post-Gricean theories,Echoic-Mention Theory and Relevant Inappropriateness Theory.According to the first theory,it is essential,for the identification of irony,to find the echoic quality of the utterance and the speaker's attitude of dissociation towards this utterance.The second theory considers irony as an ironical utterance which is both inappropriate and relevant to its context.It is Gricean at the core,but includes some departures from Grice's own model.It is argued,in this research,that echoic use of language is essential to standard cases of verbal irony while relevant inappropriateness is not.

1. Introduction

Since ancient times, irony has been a classical subject of study because of its complex communicative value and its theoretical challenge. Recently several theoretical perspectives have aimed at explaining the complex communicative phenomenon. These perspectives focus on widely different cognitive, linguistic and social aspects of ironic language use. This research will be limited to the approaches to irony that are predominant within linguistics and deliberately ignore the vast literature on the literary and philosophical uses of irony. Two principal types of theories or approaches present themselves at first look. The first approach is Grice's view (1975:53) that the speaker of an ironical utterance blatantly violates the maxim of truthfulness in order to implicate the opposite of what is literary said. The

second approach holds the view that irony is a type of echoic mention in which speakers echo, or repeat, a previously stated utterance or belief, which in context is recognized as conveying ironic meaning. In fact,the reader finds it easier to process and judge the ironic meaning of utterances, when they echo or paraphrase some earlier statement or commonly – held belief. (Gibbs and Colston, 2001: 191). The next section will briefly review some theories that show irony as a result of incongruity between the context and the statement. A section will then present irony as a type of simultaneous inappropriateness and relevance and its critique.

2. Grice's theory on verbal irony

Grice (1975) claims that speakers engaged in the act of communication cooperate with each other by being, informative, truthful and relevant. More specifically, speakers comply with the cooperative principle (CP) by following four maxims: (1) quantity – make conversational contributions informative, but only as informative as is required; (2) quality - do not say what you believe to be false or do not have evidence for; (3) relation – make contributions relevant to the current dialogue; and (4) manner – avoid ambiguity and be brief and orderly (Clark, 1996: 85)

In comprehending communicative acts, listeners assume that speakers adhere to the above conversational maxims. In order to understand a speaker's meaning, however, listeners must consider more than what is actually said (Grice, 1975). Thus, speaker meaning in Gricean theory, consists of two parts: what is said and what is implied. "What is said" is basically the surface level interpretation of an utterance. "What is implied" or the conversational implicature of an utterance, may go beyond surface structure meaning. That is, a speaker may intend an illocutionary effect that is not directly accessed via a word-by-word analysis of a sentence. A request to close the door, for example, may be phrased indirectly as the question "Do not think it's a bit cold in

here?". According to Grice's theory, speakers can create conversational implicatures either by appealing directly to the maxims of the cooperative principle or deliberately violating one or more of these maxims (Creusere: 1999:216)

On this pragmatic account, ironic speech acts serve as example of the second (i. e. indirect) way to create conversational implicature. Ironic speakers blatantly violate the maxim of quality or truth by saying something the opposite of what would be literally appropriate given context of situation. (Clark, 1996: 93). According to Grice (1975, 1978) and Searle (1979), listeners are able to preserve the maxim of truthfulness merely by comparing the surface structure of ironic utterances to the contextual information at hand and subsequently, inferring that the speaker's communicative intention diametrically opposite to what was actually said. While this claim suggests that ironic speech acts does not actually violate the maxim of truthfulness, it does not explain, Creusere 1999: 219 argues: (1) how saying the opposite of what is meant is relevant to a dialogue; (2) what information is imported by using ironic, as opposed to literal, utterances; and (3) why listeners do not interpret as deception.

The concept of "literal meaning" has recently become a subject of theoretical revision by a few scientists. Literal meaning involves the idea of words as "meaning containers", independent of any use and contextual constraints. But, as Gibbs (1999:355-359) points out, "the literal meaning of any word or sentence is almost impossible to determine". Thus, in the interpretation of an ironic comment, we do not need to proceed in an additive way, analyzing first what is said, and then what is meant. According to Gibbs (ibid) the interpretation of a comment as ironic is immediate, and it happens automatically, without any additional cognitive effort, since it does not require conscious control nor a complex computation. What people are interested in, Anolli et al (2001: 144) argue, is the actual meaning of an ironic utterance pronounced by a speaker. They want to see and grasp his/her communicative intention at once and communication and

miscommunication design follow the same cognitive process, and the utterance meaning depends on specific and contingent features of a certain situation.

Other problems with Grice's analysis of irony are stated by Wilson (2006: 1725). She thinks that Grice has to extend both his notion of implicature and his account of how implicatures are derived. She goes on to state more specific problems. One has to do with how the maxim itself should be understood. Does saying something amount simply to expressing a proposition, or does it amount to asserting a proposition, with a commitment to its truth? This makes a difference in the case of trope. If saying something is simply expressing proposition, then the first maxim of Quality is certainly violated on Grice's own ironical examples (2a) and (3b): (ibid)

(2) a. He is a fine friend.
  b. He is not a fine friend.

(3) a. Palmer gave Nicklaus quite a beating.
  b. Nicklaus vanquished Palmer with some ease.

However, if saying something is asserting a proposition, then the first maxim of Quality is not violated in (2a) and (3a), since the speaker is patently not committing him/ herself to the truth of propositions literally expressed.

Some of those problems, Wilson (ibid) argues, could be avoided by claiming that what is overtly violated in trope is not the first maxim of Quality but the first maxim of Quantity or the maxim of relation. After all, if nothing is said, then the speaker's contribution is neither informative nor relevant, and the maxims of Quantity and Relation are certainly violated.(cf. Wilson and Sperber, 2002, for further discussion).

In line with Wilson, Kaufer (1981: 499) argues that while many ironies are recognized as violating the maxim of Quality because they are transparent flashoods, "the recognition of many others has nothing to do with the speaker, violating Quality maxim" (ibid). The maxim of Relevance is violated, for example, when a speaker blames through irrelevant praises. The maxim of Manner is also violated as in the deliberate use

of ambiguity, for example, an executioner has shot a prisoner dead. He notes that his aim is just centimeters off the bull's eye and quips 'missed' in mock disgust. Here, it is the irony that causes ambiguity whether it applies to the bull's eye or the prisoner (ibid).

Consequently, Kaufer (ibid) concludes that the analysis of irony involves the full descriptive apparatus of Grice's pragmatic theory. Yet Grice's theory must be judged "inadequate in so far as it can do little more than illustrate how the overt violation of any cooperative maxims may not result in irony" (ibid). (See also Sperber and Wilson, 1981 and 1986; and Attardo, 2000a).

But in a later work (1978), Grice acknowledges that his original account of irony is descriptively inadequate. He considers an utterance which satisfies his proposed conditions on irony but would not normally be intended or understood as ironical. Grice gives the following scenarios: you and I are walking down a street and we pall a car with a broken window. I say, for example:

(4) Look that car hasn't got a broken window.

When you ask me what on earth I mean. I explain that I am merely trying to draw your attention in an ironical way that the car has a broken window. It seems that all conditions for Gricean irony are met: I've said something blatantly false, intending to communicate the opposite. Yet, the utterance is clearly not ironical. Why does the irony not work? This question will be addressed in the following sections to see whether irony processing is echoic or relevant inappropriateness.

3. Irony and echoic use

In contrast with the traditional account of irony in terms of truthfulness, and mainly with Grice's proposal that irony is a case of violating the conversational maxims of Quality, (see Grice, 1975-1978), relevance theorists suggest that irony should be viewed as a case of echoic mention, and that

recognition of an ironical utterance as a case of mention is crucial to its interpretation.

According to Echoic Mention theory, Creusere (1999: 213) points out that listeners understand ironic utterances by appealing to implicit or explicit thoughts, behaviour, utterances or social norms. Yus (2000: 28) states that an ironic utterance in this respect, is an interpretation of another thought, utterance or an assumption, which it resembles or attributes to different speaker's utterance at another time. An example of echoic utterance, in which the speaker (b) refers to a statement, made previously by a speaker (a) in the following:

(5) a. Peter: it is a lovely day for a picnic. [They go for a picnic and it rains]

b. Mary: (sarcastically): it's a lovely day for a picnic, indeed. (Sperber and Wilson: 1995: 239).

Consequently, Attardo (2000a: 804) points out that the speaker of an echoic utterance must necessarily have a certain attitude (positive, negative and neutral) towards the echoic utterance itself. In this respect, Attardo (ibid) quotes Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 239) as saying that "sometimes, the speaker's attitude is left implicit, to be gathered only from tone of voice, context and other paralinguistic clues, at other times it may be made explicit". In this regard Sperber and Wilson proceed to expand their theory of irony. They argue that "[irony] invariably involves the implicit expression of the attitude, and that the relevance of an ironical utterance invariably depends at least in part, on the information it conveys about the speaker's attitude to the opinion echoed" (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 239). As a result, an echoic utterance achieves relevance by "making it possible for the hearer to recognize, and perhaps to emulate, the speaker's interest in, and attitude to, somebody else's thoughts" (Sperber and Wilson, 1990:5). Thus, the implicature of an ironical utterance, according to Sperber and Wilson (ibid: 240) depends on the following factors:

1. A recognition of the utterance as echoic;
2. Identification of the source of the opinion echoed;
3. Recognition that the speaker's attitude to the opinion echoed is one of rejection disapproval.

On this basis, Gibbs and O'Brein (1991: 526) point out that relevance theory holds the view that ironic utterances are essentially about the speaker's attitudes. Irony is understood not when a non-literal proposition is accomplished for a literal one, " but when the listener is reminded echoicallyof some familiar proposition (whose truth value is irrelevant), and of the speaker's attitude toward it" in other words, irony as echoic-mention is departure from the traditional analysis that of literally saying one thing and figuratively meaning the opposite.

As mentioned above, there are several potential problems with the traditional view of irony. One of the most commonly criticized assumptions made by echoic theory is that irony is comprehended via inferences related to the opposite of an utterance's literal meaning (Gibbs & O'Brein, ibid). As Gibbs and O'Brein noted, the opposite of utterance's literal meaning and a speaker's real communicative intention are often difficult to determine. For example, imagine a situation in which person A is telling acquaintance B about a good friend who always borrows A's money, car, and clothes, yet can never be located when A is in need. If B comments

(6) I sure wish I had a good friend like yours,

the opposite interpretation of the comment could either be:

(7) I don’t wish I had a food friend like yours or

(8)"I wish I had a bad friend like yours". Clearly then, neither interpretation reflects, the real communicative intention of the speaker, which is to express something like "your friend is not a very good one, if she only takes you for granted and gives you nothing back in return".

According to "echoic mention" or "reminder" theories of irony, listeners understand ironic utterances by appealing to implicit or explicit thought, behaviour, utterances or social

norms (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) In contrast to traditional theory, comprehension of ironic utterances involves a one-stage, rather than two-stage, process; listeners do not have to entertain the literal meaning of an ironic utterance in order to understand its gist. Thus, it is frequently claimed that an understanding of irony is more different than comprehension of literal sentences (Gibbs & O'Brein, ibid, Sperber, Wilson, ibid). Furthermore, the main function of irony is to reveal a speaker's attitude toward a situation; the speaker reminds the listener not only of a shared expectation or social norm but also what should have, as opposed to what had, occurred in a situation. (Creusere: 1999: 218).

4. Context Incongruity

Many approaches and theories have shown that irony can perceived as a result of incongruity between the context and the statement (Ivanko and Pexman, 2003: 241). Ivanko and Pexman mention some of these (Colston,2002; Colston & O'Brein, 2000; Gerrig & Goldvarg, 2000; Katz & Lee, 1993; Katz Pexman, 1997, Krevz & Glucksberg, 1989; Pexman, Ferretti & Katz, 2000; Pexman & Olineck, 2002).

Verbal irony serves many communicative purposes. One of these is to highlight disparity between expectations and reality. Ironic statements like:

(9) You are so punctual.

Often convey failed expectations. The statement expresses what the speaker expected (punctuality), and because the statement is out of keeping with events there is incongruity between the speaker's attitude (negative, disappointment) and their action (a positive statement). This incongruity is reliable cue to ironic intent. Further, the degree of incongruity influences the extent to which ironic intent is perceived (Ivanko and Pexman, 2003: 424). That is, Gerrig and Goldvarg (2000) cited in Ivanko and Pexman, (ibid), examined the effect of the degree of situational disparity on the perception of irony. They found that greater situational disparity led to a higher perception of irony, compared to a

situation with less disparity. Hence, there is clearly an effect of degree of disparity on the perception of irony. Similarly, Colston and O'Brein (2000) cited in Ivanko and Pexman, (ibid), manipulated the degree of contrast between context situation and an ironic statement. Colstre and O'Brein (ibid), examined pragmatic functions of both strong and week ironic statements. When there was a high degree of a difference between the strong and weak version of statements, the speakers of strongly ironic statements were related to be more condemning, more humorous, and more self-protecting than the speaker of weakly ironic statements. These results suggest that a perception of irony is dependent on disparity or contrast, which can be created by the strength of the statement or by the strength of the context.

Colston (2002: 130) expanded on the straightforward notion of contrast in verbal irony comprehension to suggest that the perception of verbal irony and appreciation of its pragmatic functions are subject to contrast effects. Contrast effects are observed in many contexts, (e.g., perception, judgement, interpretation) and describe the situation where biasing information is presented and influences perception or interpretation in a direction way from the biasing information. A strongly positive statement (the biasing information) presented in a negative situation can make the situation (the target) appear more negative. To summarize, with an ironic (positive) statement, if discrepancy between the negative context situation and the statement is large, a contrast effect could emerge and, consequently, the situation would be judged as being more negative than it would with a literal (negative) statement. On the other hand, if the discrepancy is smaller, because the ironic statement is less positive an assimilation effect would be observed and the situation would be judged to be less negative than it would have been with a literal statement. One might predict that situations involving contrast effects require additional processing, because contrast effect alters the perception of the situation to be

more negative, and there is some evidence that negative information takes longer to process than positive information.

Gibbs (1994: 437) states that "recognition of the incongruity between what people say and what they do reflects the cognitive ability of people process, and does not to be particularly effortful. Instead, understanding irony requires parallel activation of literal and figurative meanings." This seems evident because, in some situation, while we are speaking ironically, we may also be making literal statement. For example, a driver may say:

(10) I love people who signal, after being cut off by another driver. Although the speaker is being ironic in the sense that the other driver did not use this signal, this statement also reflects the speaker's literal belief(ibid).

Gibbs (ibid: 413) argues that "the ease with which many figurative utterances are produced and comprehended is due in part to the context for linguistic understanding, or more specifically, common ground (i.e. the knowledge, beliefs, and attitude that are recognized as being shared by speakers and listeners in any discourse situation)"

Explicit predictions about context and irony processes were recently offered by Utsumi (2000). Utsumi proposed the Implicit Display Theory, which involved three main criteria: (a) the presence of an ironic environment (i.e. context); (b) the ironic environment displayed implicitly; and (3) prototypicality of ironic utterance. Utsumi argues that the ironic environment can allow for irony to be processed in the same time as literal language. (Utsumi, 2005).

Thus, in the processing of irony, most theories Congreve around the notion of contrast or incongruity between the actual situation and the expectations and / or utterances of speaker. Attardo (2000, a: 793-826) tries to reduce the concept of "inappropriateness" to incongruity. It is an attempt to argue whether incongruity and inappropriateness are interchangeable. This question will be addressed in the following section. (cf. Attardo, 2001: 169)

5. Irony as relevant inappropriateness

The theory of irony as relevant inappropriateness was proposed by Attardo (2000b:3). This theory claims that an ironical utterance is both inappropriate and relevant to its context. This theory is Gricean at the core, but includes, several significant departures from Grice's theory. (ibid)

The theory can be formulated as follows:

An utterance U is ironical if

1. **U is contextually inappropriate,**
2. **U is (at the same time relevant),**
3. **U is constructed as having been uttered intentionally and with awareness of the contextual inappropriateness by speaker S, and**
4. **S intends that (part of) his/ her audience recognize points 1-3 (ibid)**

Accordingly, appropriateness as an extension of Grice's cooperative principle is defined by Attardo, 2000, a,b as " an utterance U is contextually appropriate, if all presuppositions of U are identical to or compatible with all the presuppositions of context C in which 4 is uttered except for any feature explicitly thematized and denied in U. (ibid)

On this basis, Attrando (2000a 813) starts his theory with the following points:

1. **The ironic meaning is arrived at inferentially, hence**
2. **irony is entirely a pragmatic phenomenon,**
3. **the interpretation of the ironical meaning depends crucially on the active guidance of the cp ergo.**

In order to show this principle works, Attardo (ibid) gives the following example:

(11) S: What nice weather. (context: it is raining)

H: , here will assume that the utterance is relevant to the condition of the weather and not to, say, the location of our cut.

There seems to be, here, unnoticed principle 'smallest possible disruption' of the cp at work. It seems as a first approximation to its information, that the principle of smallest warns S to limit his/ her violation of the cp to the smallest possible conversational unit (one utterance, one conversational turn, one speech exchange) and to try to link the entire CP-violating unit to the rest of the interaction, for example by finding a certain appropriateness to the CP-violating unit.

Thus, in example (11) above, H, upon noticing the disruption of the CP does not withdraw from the conversation but assumes that the violation of the CP is the smallest possible and, therefore, that the violation must somehow refer to the context, and be meaningful. Consider the same example (11) above with an ironical tone while it is raining:
(12) What nice weather.

Upon the hearer's interpretation of utterance (12) as ironical, one says something along the lines of (13).
(13) I was just kidding, as a matter of fact I love rain.
In other words, S would be deceiving H about his/ her intention to be ironical. There is no a prior season for limiting the violation of CP to the smallest possible context, except for the desire of the speaker to facilitate communication even when a violation is present or necessary. It means that there is another broader communicative principle, that tolerates violation as long as they are kept as limited as possible.

On the basis of this principle, Attardo (2000a: 816) suggests two factors that direct the inferential processing of the value of irony:

1. the maxim of relevance,
2. the antiphrastic / antonymic assumption of irony

in other words, H assumes, after having recognized (a part of) a text as ironical, that the maxim of relevance holds and that relevance of irony lies in the direction of antiphrastic meaning, i.e., in the direction of the opposite of what S is saying with a special emphasis on his/ her value judgments.

But irony, there, is non-cooperative at first reading since every ironical utterance seems to be literally false and/ or not appropriate to its context. Consider the following example:
(14) I love children so if one says this utterance while, in fact, disliking them, clearly, one is technically lying, but one's tone of voice or other signals may make it clear that one is deliberately and conspicuously violating the maxim of quality, and signaling to the hearer(s). Then one is not really lying but rather being ironical. This type of example can be explained as an implicature, but the following example would be problematic for a straightforward Gricean model:
(15) This is the happiest night of my life (uttered during the middle of the day). This example is neither true or false (hence, it does not violate quality) when pronounced in daylight, but, it is inappropriate. In the appropriate context, (15) could be ironical if, for instance, pronounced in the early morning by a speaker well-known for his/ her late-rising habit.

The earlier example (11) uttered while it is raining, clearly belongs to the inappropriateness category of irony as well, but unlike (15), which also involves a literal non-truth. In other words, appropriateness and several other conditions and maxims can be violated in an ironic utterance. What examples (11) and (15) have in common is that they would fail to be identified as ironical by Gricean account of i.e. they fail to violate a maxim, but they all entail an inappropriate utterance. Violation of a maxim creates an inappropriate utterance. Thus, all examples of irony accounted for by implicature can be accounted for an inappropriate utterance as well. Consider (14) again if one does not like children, it is inappropriate to say that one does.

On the basis of these observations, it is possible to define an utterance as ironical, while maintaining relevance, explicity or implicity violating the conditions for contextual appropriateness, either deictically or more broadly in terms of the knowledge by the participants of the opinions and belief systems of the speakers. What Attardo means (2000a), here, is that it is perfectly acceptable for S to violate the maxim of relevance in the first stage and then follow it in the second. Thus, the definition in the text should be understood as " maintaining relevance" in the second stage of processing.

Attardo (ibid) goes on to introduce an interesting exception to CP, since he is drawing an inference on the basis of a rule not included in it: "be contextually appropriate" which is, he argues, not the same as being relevant. According to definition of appropriateness above,, Attardo (ibid) argues that appropriateness is truth-sensitive, since if we change the truth-value of a proposition presupposed by an utterance, the utterance's appropriateness may change:

(16) John should leave the room.

(17) John is in the room.

The utterance in (16) presupposes (17). If (17) is false, then (16) becomes inappropriate.

Relevance, on the other hand, is not truth sensitive. This is clearly, Attardo argues, established by Sperber and Wilson: (1995 [1986]: 236), cited in Attardo (ibid) state that the "definition of the relevance of an assumption in a context takes an account of the subjective truth or falsity of the assumption itself." (1995[1986]: 263)

Thus, Attardo (ibid) concludes that relevance and appropriateness are not coextensive, since relevance is truth-insensitive. But this argument is not accurate, since Sperber and Wilson, (ibid: 263-266) go on to revise the original

definition of relevance by taking into account the truthfulness of utterances. They recognize that S may be more interested in true statements than false one. This idea then incorporated in the revised definition of relevance under the label of 'positive cognitive effect' i.e. "a cognitive effect contributes positively to the fulfillment of cognitive functions or goals" (ibid: 265).

Moreover, the underlying of relevance theory is that "in any given context we have to assume that what people say is relevant " (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 161). This means that to be relevant is to be contextually appropriate and this account is related to the maxim of relevance suggested by Grice (1975) –Make your contribution relevant. In this regard, the Gricean account of irony suggests that one recognizes a given utterance as non-literal on the basis of perceived incongruity between the utterance of its context and/or the set of beliefs ascribed to the speaker. An inferred meaning intended by the speaker is then looked for by using the CP. (Grice, ibid). Thus, incongruity, here, is the same of inappropriateness suggested by Arrardo's theory.

6. Conclusion

In this research, two main points have been raised. These points are seen as pretending problems for relevant inappropriateness account of irony. First, violation of a maxim creates an inappropriate utterance and it is perfectly acceptable for S to violate the maxim of relevance in the first stage and then follow it in the second. Here, it is not clear for the maxim of relevance to be violated first and then followed. If it is violated at the first stage, how is it possible for it to be in coincidence with the inappropriate utterance?

Second, an utterance is ironical if it is contextually inappropriate. That is, for an utterance, to be ironical it should be as a result of incongruity between the context and the statement and this is the main core of Grice's Theory and many pragmatists after. To sum up, it is not clear that Attardo's Theory is a real departure or extension for Grice's Theory. It seems to be an eclectic theory of Grice's theory and Echoic Mention Theory but the latter is more explicit and plausible than that of both Grice's Theory and Attardo's Theory.

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